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Johnson Faces Crisis in Vietnam

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BY ROBERT S. ALLEN and PAUL SCOTT

President Johnson is painfully learning that the explosive political and military mess in South Vietnam could easily become his first major foreign crisis.

He is being frankly warned that the fate of South Vietnam's new army junta will be decided in the next 60 days during the "battle of the rice crop."

In a series of backstage intelligence briefings, the President was told that well-organized and heavily-armed Communist Viet Cong guerrillas are sharply increasing their attacks to shake the peasants' confidence in the new military regime and gain control of the rice harvest.

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These Communist attacks, which have doubled in the five weeks since the military junta overthrew and killed President Ngo Dinh Diem, are expected to reach their peak later this month and in January, the rice harvest time in the rich southern delta area.

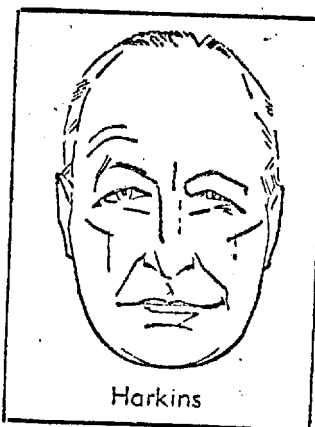
The President's military and intelligence advisers are stressing that the Viet Congs have two major objectives in launching this new military offensive.

If the Communists can gain control of the rice harvest, they will have sufficient food to sustain their stepped-up military operations throughout the coming season and for use in inducing Vietnamese peasants, who know little about the new military junta, to aid their campaign.

By preventing the rice, the backbone of South Vietnam's economy and food supply, from going

into regular commercial channels, the Viet Congs can cause a major food shortage and curtail government income from exports.

To counter this new aggression, President Johnson is sending instructions to Gen. Paul Harkins, head of U.S.



Harkins

military forces in South Vietnam, to provide all help needed to divert additional South Vietnamese forces to protect the rice crop during this critical period.

In a personal message to Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, head of the new military junta, the President has notified him of the help Gen. Harkins is prepared to offer.

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On the political front, President Johnson faces a decision on whether to put pressure on the junta to protect Catholics, who are being persecuted in scattered areas of South Vietnam.

A report prepared by the Rev. Patrick O'Connor, of the Society of St. Columban, and turned over to the CIA in South Vietnam reveals that Catholics in Thua Thien province are being threa-

tened, falsely accused, beaten and imprisoned.

All this has happened since the South Vietnamese army leaders, with covert U.S. help, overthrew the Diem regime and brought about local as well as national changes in government officials.

According to Father O'Connor's report, "The anti-Christian campaign in the villages did not begin until about one week after the coup that overthrew the former government."

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He warns that the campaign is being inspired by the Communists and is hurting the war effort against the Viet Congs, stating:

"One result of the anti-Christian campaign is the weakening of the whole village defense system in the provinces closest to the Communist North. New local authorities seem weak, either through inexperience or fear of 'the crowd,' which is actually an aggressive minority certainly not representative of authentic Buddhism."

He reports that in Quang Tri province, near the 17th parallel which divides South Vietnam from Communist-ruled North Vietnam, "Catholics have been beaten and tied with wire. Victims wounded by beatings in one village were refused treatment in the small government medical stations to which they had gone."

The report is now being studied by President Johnson's top foreign policy advisers for recommendations on what action the President should take to end these new intimidations against a minority group.